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## LOCAL NEWS

Posted on: Wednesday, January 7, 2009

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# EPA won't renew sewage exemption

*Required upgrades could cost city about \$1.2 billion*

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By **Peter Boylan**  
 Advertiser Staff Writer

After nearly two decades of giving Honolulu's contaminated sewage a pass, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ordered the city yesterday to upgrade its treatment facilities.

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City officials say the improvements could cost \$1.2 billion, and Mayor Mufi Hannemann said he will likely appeal the EPA ruling. If upheld, yesterday's decision could force the city to raise sewer fees.

The EPA concluded that wastewater discharged to the ocean from Honolulu's two largest treatment plants does not meet federal water quality standards.

Improving the wastewater plants "will ensure that residents and visitors using Hawaii's ocean waters are protected from inadequately treated sewage," said Wayne Nasti, the EPA's administrator for the Pacific Southwest region. "We will work with the city on a realistic schedule to upgrade its two largest wastewater plants."

Before yesterday's ruling, the EPA had given Honolulu waivers, exempting the city's two major plants — Sand Island and Honouliuli — from performing a process called full secondary sewage treatment, which is required at nearly all similar U.S. facilities.

Hannemann said in a statement he was disappointed but not surprised by the EPA decision.

"Every indication was that the EPA would decline to renew the waivers these plants have operated under for so long, so today's decision was not unexpected," Hannemann said. "However, we had hoped that the EPA would reconsider its tentative decision, in light of the overwhelming evidence presented by our local scientists and engineers that secondary treatment at these plants is not necessary or beneficial. We will review the final decision, and in all likelihood seek a review, as provided for by the EPA regulations."



The EPA yesterday ended 20 years of waivers and ordered the city to upgrade its sewage plants, including this one on Sand Island.

ADVERTISER LIBRARY PHOTO | July 15, 2007

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The two main Honolulu treatment plants put sewage through what is known as primary treatment and some secondary treatment before pumping it into the ocean at least 1.7 miles offshore.

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Primary treatment generally involves screening out large floating objects, such as rags and sticks, removing grit, such as cinders, sand and small stones, and allowing wastewater to settle, followed by the removal of collected solids, according to the EPA.

Secondary treatment exposes primary-treated wastewater to microorganisms, such as bacteria, which consume most organic matter. The microorganisms are then removed before the wastewater is discharged.

After reviewing data from water samples gathered between 1991 and 2003, the EPA concluded yesterday that the discharges from the two plants do not meet the federal Clean Water Act's requirements for municipal sewage.

The two Honolulu plants handle the bulk of O'ahu's wastewater, but the city says that upgrading them is unnecessary and costly. The money would be better spent on other projects, including repairs to the island's crumbling network of sewage pipes, officials have argued.

Robert Harris, director of the Sierra Club's Hawai'i chapter, lauded the EPA's decision, calling it a necessary step toward bringing the city into compliance with national standards.

"We're now comportsing with every major municipality on the Mainland. They (EPA officials) are making this decision with the best interest of public health and safety," Harris said. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand why people would want to swim in an ocean and eat fish from water that (has properly) treated sewage flowing into it."

If the EPA findings are upheld, the city will have to negotiate a timeline for doing the work and paying for it.

An order to upgrade the treatment plants would have to take into account the city's workload and finances, and the EPA is trying to establish a schedule for getting the county into compliance.

The work may lead to increases in sewer fees beyond the latest round of rate hikes. Starting July 1, 2008, sewer fees increased 18 percent, and are scheduled for another 18 percent increase in 2009 and a 15 percent increase in 2010.

Those fee increases were for work unrelated to the upgrade of the treatment plants.

Under pressure from the EPA and environmental groups after years of sewage spills, the city agreed in federal court in 2007 to evaluate or replace six major pressurized pipes at an estimated cost of \$300 million.

The deal came after a major Waikiki sewer pipe ruptured in March 2006 and sent 48 million gallons of raw sewage into the Ala Wai Canal and out to sea. The city is planning additional pipe replacement work that's expected to cost more than \$100 million.

## COUNCIL REACTION

City Council members reacted with a mix of surprise and concern yesterday as they considered the question of how to pay for compliance.

Some said building secondary treatment systems would take money away from projects aimed at shoring up aging infrastructure and sewer lines while others argued that the city should have ensured Clean Water Act compliance years ago.

Council member Gary Okino called the EPA's ruling "ridiculous" and vowed to fight it.

"It's a bad decision. It won't improve the environment and it will be a financial burden to the city and

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county, a huge one, and during a time when we don't need that," Okino said. "We have to fight it all the way to the top. The scientific community in Hawai'i has told the EPA many times over that what we're doing now does not harm the environment."

City officials and some scientists have argued that secondary treatment was not necessary on O'ahu because wastewater is discharged far offshore, in deep water at the center of the world's largest ocean.

Council chairman Todd Apo said if the city is forced to comply, he hopes it could qualify for federal money aimed at stimulating the economy through infrastructure development.

"The federal government is looking at putting money into infrastructure in order to bolster the economy and I hope that we can be involved in something like that since this was ordered by the EPA," Apo said. "Now they won't cover a lot of it and they may not cover much of it. It's a big (capital improvement) project and we'll have to bond it because we can't pay that up front. We'll have to look at the kind of debt service load we're carrying."

Council member Charles Djou said the city could have prevented this by slowly bringing the wastewater treatment system into compliance with the Clean Water Act.

"The public should legitimately be upset with how the city government is handling this," Djou said. "Ninety-nine percent of all municipalities, including all of the Neighbor Islands, managed to find a way to comply with the federal Clean Water Act and Honolulu is one of the few cities that has refused to comply. I don't think the average voter understands that."

Council member Donovan Dela Cruz said he hopes the incoming federal administration will be able to assist the county with the EPA order.

"That seems really extreme for the EPA to do that," Dela Cruz said. "Once there is a new administration in the White House, I think the city will be in a better position to start some real communication with the EPA. You want to make sure that you look out for the environment and the taxpayer."

## **BACTERIA LEVELS**

In March 2007, the EPA found that bacteria levels around the Honouliuli plant's discharge were higher than national standards adopted in 2004 to protect swimmers, surfers and others from gastrointestinal diseases.

Similar findings reported in 2007 concluded that bacteria levels also were too high near the Sand Island plant's outfall.

After the plant began operating a new ultraviolet light disinfection system last year, bacteria counts dropped to acceptable levels, but there are other problems at the plant, the EPA found.

A federal judge ruled in October 2007 that the delays in construction and high bacteria levels led to 4,000 violations of the federal wastewater discharge permit for Sand Island.

Effluent from both plants proved toxic to sea urchins in laboratory tests and produced excess ammonia that can harm other aquatic organisms, according to the EPA.

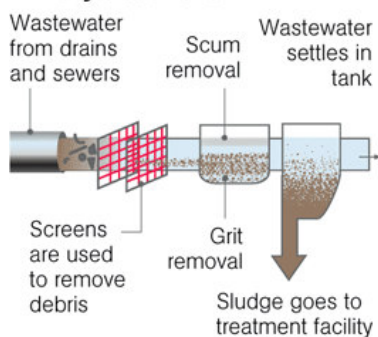
Samples from both plants also contained excess levels of two pesticides, dieldrin and chlordane.

Reach Peter Boylan at [pboylan@honoluluadvertiser.com](mailto:pboylan@honoluluadvertiser.com).

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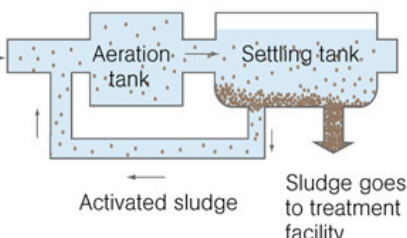
## HOW WASTEWATER IS TREATED

### Primary treatment



### Secondary treatment

Aeration is the most common process; it uses a biological treatment to settle solids in wastewater.



Source: city Department of Environmental Services, www.epa.gov/ogwdw/



### TROUBLED WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANTS

| WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT | OUTFALL DISTANCE FROM SHORE | AVERAGE DEPTH (Feet) | AVERAGE No. OF GALLONS TREATED YEARLY |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Sand Island              | 1.73 miles                  | 225 to 240           | 24,291 million                        |
| 2 Honouliuli               | 1.70 miles                  | 200                  | 9,849 million                         |

\*Includes Waikiki

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Wazdat wrote:

SAD, MUFI and APO. WAKE UP, do you two even ever swim or surf in our waters? and what is with those big black pipes on the ala wai, they have been there for years, looks like a third world country.

01/07/2009 8:38:21 a.m.

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Wazdat wrote:

Replying to IG777:  
now thats the truth...

*Mufi is too arrogant and self-centered to think clearly. He would rather focus on his stupid heavy rail, instead of focusing on public health and safety issues. We have failing infrastructure, untreated sewage spills, broken water mains and potholes from hell; yet he ignores these until they blow up in his face and end up costing the taxpayers 1.2 billion dollars. Forget the rail and use that money to fix everything that's broken first! And forget about raising our sewer fees - we can barely afford what we're paying now!*

01/07/2009 8:35:43 a.m.

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**Colschenck** wrote:

Water mains and sewer pipes break quite frequently on Oahu. Although treated effluent from the two treatment plants may not be harming the environment near the deep-water outfalls, the possibility exists a break could occur near shore. If that were to occur, it could close beaches along the entire south shore and deal a devastating blow to the state's lifeline--tourism. Can we afford to take that chance?

01/07/2009 8:33:16 a.m.

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**localboy333** wrote:

I used to get sick a lot(colds) from swimming in our beautiful and "visibly clean" beaches off Waikiki and Ala Moana....I have not swum at those beaches for over a year now, and guess what, I have not been sick for over a year.....

There still must be lots of bacteria and \*\*\*\* in the water all the time!!!!....and guess where it came from!!!!

So all you tourist and local swimmers and surfers, be careful of the waters, as clean and as beautiful as it appears to be!!!.....

Mufi, please clean the waters up ASAP and don't charge us locals (huge sewer bill increase) for it....instead, just use your choo choo train money for it.....

I miss my swimming time at the beach.....auwe!!!!

01/07/2009 7:54:47 a.m.

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**kalaeloalad** wrote:

Replying to bboops:

*Stop the rail!! Use the money to fix this problem! Oh, but NO Mufi won't consider that because he wants his name on the rail. He would rather stiff us taxpayers with the bill.*

*My sewer fee is three times more than my water bill. Now he will want to make it higher. Mufi don't go there because enough is enough. People, lets stand up to this. We pay more taxes than the rest of the nation. E-mail our legislators, senators, representatives and lets stop paying for more than we should.*

You are lucky my bill was \$22.00 water, \$101.00 sewer. Do you really believe our senators,representatives, et al really care what we think?

01/07/2009 7:30:10 a.m.

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